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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001340

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [EAID IS](#) [KWBG PREL](#) [SENV GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS](#) [ENVIRONMENT](#) [SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY](#)
SUBJECT: GAZA DISENGAGEMENT WATER ISSUES: STILL MUCH WORK
TO DO

REF: 04 TEL AVIV 6500

Classified By: Economic Counselor William Weinstein, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This message has been cleared with Consulate General
Jerusalem and USAID West Bank-Gaza Mission.

1. (C) Summary: Although Israeli and Palestinian water officials have generally displayed relatively close cooperation, they have not worked out specific arrangements pertaining to Israel's disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank. The Israeli Water Commissioner reported that Israel has solved its water scarcity problem by desalination and waste water treatment, and can supply additional water to Gaza, albeit at market prices. The acting Chairman of the Palestinian Water Authority is more knowledgeable about the West Bank than Gaza, and recently questioned whether the PA should take over agricultural assets when Israeli settlers depart Gaza. We are urging both sides to meet soon to review outstanding water issues related to Gaza disengagement. End summary.

Israel Solving Problem of Water Scarcity, But Still Issues of Ability to Pay

2. (SBU) Econ Counselor, ESTH Officer, and USAID West Bank-Gaza Water Projects Director called on Israeli Water Commissioner Shimon Tal on February 28 to inquire about preparations for Gaza disengagement and related issues. Tal said he and his colleagues believed they have solved the problem of water scarcity in Israel through desalination and treatment of wastewater. Regarding water quality, the Commission is working with several U.S. companies to remove excess salts from ground water. Israel's water problem is now one of "financial scarcity," Tal said. Industry and municipalities are able to pay for water, but "national interests," particularly agriculture and nature preserves and other open green spaces, can not pay the real cost of water. Tal said Israel's water sector needs to be reorganized to place all water management "under one roof" to manage such public needs "more on natural principles." Then Israel would be able to prevent future scarcity problems.

GOI Committed to Helping Gaza with Water Needs

3. (C) On Gaza Disengagement, Tal said that the amount of water currently supplied to Israeli settlers was minor compared to Gaza's total needs. He anticipates that the wells used by the settlers would be turned over to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Although the national grid would need to provide water for new settlements within Israel proper, the Commission could continue to provide current or even greater quantities to Gaza from the grid, albeit at market prices. (Note: Water currently supplied to the settlers for agricultural use is subsidized, but Israel would not make those subsidies available to the PA. End note).

4. (C) The Commission and the PWA have not yet discussed specific arrangements related to Gaza disengagement. Tal said he was waiting for "an agreement" between Israel and the PA on disengagement, but would be willing to work with the PWA to ensure turnover arrangements went smoothly. ESTH Officer and USAID Water Projects Director spoke briefly with Infrastructure Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer March 2 on the margins of the Desalination Conference in Tel Aviv. The Minister said he hoped the Palestinians "would be independent soon," and that he was ready to support their needs for water supplies in the meantime.

Unauthorized Wells: Cooperation and Concern

5. (C) Tal said that the IDF had recently taken action against nine unauthorized wells on the West Bank in cooperation with the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA). He was very concerned that the PWA would lose control of unauthorized drilling on the West Bank after disengagement. (Note: This is more of a long-term issue as the four small settlement areas in the northern West Bank that will be evacuated will likely remain classified as Area C, where Israel has full administrative and security control. End note). Haphazard drilling had already ruined the aquifer in Gaza.

Acting PWA Chairman Just Starting to Focus on Disengagement

16. (C) ESTH Officer discussed preparations for disengagement with PWA Acting Chairman Fadel Kawash over lunch at the Desalination Conference. Kawash said the new PA Agriculture Minister Waleed Abed Rabo had asked him whether the PA should try to maintain settler agri-business assets (e.g. greenhouses) following disengagement. Kawash told the agriculture minister that from the standpoint of water, the PA should not/not maintain those operations. He said he was concerned that water catchment structures on the settlements might be preventing replenishment of the Gush Katif aquifer. When ESTH Officer noted that the settlers relied primarily on wells and the Israeli grid, Kawash said he may have spoken too soon and needed to get more information. He commented that he and Tal needed to improve the exchange of information related to disengagement.

17. (C) Kawash said that he and Ben-Eliezer spoke just before the conference started earlier that day and had agreed to meet in the near future to discuss priority projects. He asked that the U.S. continue to work to bring the sides together and encourage the exchange of information and cooperation related to Gaza disengagement. ESTH Officer saw Tal at the Desalination Conference later that day and urged him to move forward on sharing information with Kawash.

Plenty of Work To Do

18. (C) Comment: The Water Commission and the PWA continued their cooperation throughout the Intifadah. However, they have been slow to rise to the new challenges posed by Gaza disengagement. This is largely because most direct discussions between the GOI and PA on disengagement did not begin until February. The lack of direct discussions in the water sector is likely reflective of the recent death after a long illness of long-time PWA Chair Nabil Sharif who was based in Gaza and hesitation by both Tal and Kawash about getting out in front of the process. We will be pressing the NSC and other Israeli bodies involved in disengagement to assure Tal that he can move ahead with informational exchanges on water. We will also continue to encourage the parties to make water arrangements for Gaza disengagement-related water arrangements a major topic for discussion at the next meeting of the Trilateral Water Working Group, tentatively scheduled for April 7. End comment.

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